

## **Geographical Introduction**

Death Valley is located in southeast California in the Mojave Desert, just west of the California-Nevada state border. The words "Death Valley" can be confusing to people not familiar with the area as they can describe the valley itself or Death Valley National Park. Death Valley National Park is the largest national park in the continental United States and contains a vast range of elevations and landscapes within it including the valley named Death Valley. (From this point on the words "Death Valley" will refer to the valley and the entire national park). Death Valley stretches nearly 140 miles and is oriented northwest to southeast and extends from Last Chance Canyon in the north to near Saratoga Springs in the south. Abrupt elevation changes in as little as 15 miles exist due to the mountain chains that surround the valley. The valley is bordered by the Last Chance Range and Panamint and Owshead Mountains to the west, the Sylvania Mountains to the north and the Grapevine, Funeral and Black Mountains to the east. The Owshead Mountains also form most of the southwest border of the valley, while the southeast portion is a more loosely defined area of the desert floor above sea level. The Panamint Mountains are the tallest mountain range that border the valley floor and have elevations over 11,000 feet tall, with the tallest point being Telescope Peak at 11,049 feet. The Grapevine, Funeral and Black Mountains average 4,000 to 5,000 feet with the tallest peak being just over 7,900 feet. The valley floor itself consists of areas above sea level at the north and south ends as well as a roughly 500 square mile area below sea level in the center of the valley. The lowest point on the valley floor is Badwater Basin at 282 feet below sea level which is the lowest point in North America.

Most of the valley floor is sparsely vegetated with vast sections containing no vegetation at all. Common native vegetation includes creosote bushes with date palms and mesquite trees planted around developed areas. The National Park Service states on their official park website that over 1,000 species of plants and 440 species of animals live in Death Valley National Park, but many of these live in specific sections as well as higher elevations of the park. The valley floor consists of sand and small rocks along with a roughly 200 square mile area of salt flats (Hunt et. al 1966). The mountains that surround the valley do exhibit variations in rock color with shades ranging from cream to dark brown. In most cases, the lower portions of these mountains are void or nearly void of vegetation themselves.

A few areas of the valley floor do contain development. The United States Park Service operates a visitor center in the north-central portion of the valley in an area known as Furnace Creek at an elevation of 190 feet below sea level. Some development does exist just south and southwest of this area including the Furnace Creek Ranch as well as a golf course and the Furnace Creek Airport. About 3,000 feet to the southwest of the Furnace Creek Visitor Center sits the Timbisha Shoshone Tribe Village. Other significant areas of development on or near the valley floor include the Inn at Furnace Creek (located at and slightly

above sea level), Cow Creek (about 150 feet below sea level) and Stovepipe Wells Village (around 10 feet above sea level). All of these also sit in the north-central part of the valley.